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Can there be a responsible nuclear weapon state? Understanding the agency and moral relevance of nuclear weapons

This article reviews competing understandings of the agency and moral relevance of nuclear weapons for international politics among two incommensurable worldviews in global nuclear politics: hegemonic nuclearism and subaltern anti-nuclearism. It argues that what (if anything) is considered a responsible nuclear weapon state largely depends on implicit assumptions about the agency and moral relevance of nuclear weapons. Despite the enormous growth in research related to nuclear deterrence, the available evidence remains ambiguous and inconclusive allowing for competing interpretations about the efficacy and reliability of nuclear deterrence and the co-existence of various "nuclear ontologies" (Ritchie 2022). After introducing the concepts of action schemes and second-order responsibility, the article analyzes how the two ontologies understand the agency of nuclear weapons for international politics. Whereas hegemonic nuclearism places emphasis on the instrumental role of nuclear weapons for deterrence and stability, subaltern anti-nuclearism pays much greater attention to unintended ways in which nuclear weapons shape the sets of options available to human agents, including the inherent risk of inadvertent escalation, the opportunity costs of nuclear deterrence, and the extremely unequal distribution of security benefits from nuclear deterrence. From a subaltern anti-nuclearist perspective, the diminished human agency in nuclear deterrence provides little need to distinguish responsible from irresponsible nuclear weapon states based on their identity and intentions. Instead, subaltern anti-nuclearism deems nuclear possession itself problematic in the sense of second-order responsibility. The article contributes to a growing literature seeking to operationalize and engage with notions of responsibility in relation to nuclear weapons and explores the ontological foundations of competing discourses in global nuclear politics.

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Primary author: THIES, Tim (Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg)

Presenter: THIES, Tim (Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg)

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